

Guatemala: Wave of attacks on human rights defenders must end

Human rights defenders and other members of civil society in Guatemala are coming under increasing attack, Amnesty International said today as its members are starting an action in support of human rights activists in the country.

In recent months, human rights organizations and advocates, as well as others investigating human rights abuses, have been increasingly targeted. Acts of intimidation have included death threats, as well as office break-ins and computer hacking resulting in important data relating to efforts to bring perpetrators of past abuses to justice being stolen, erased or altered.

Foreign human rights workers have also been victims of abuse. In one incident, an American nun was shot and killed in an incident which local human rights groups fear may have been an extrajudicial execution related to her past human rights work. In June, an Amnesty International delegate on a research mission to Guatemala, was seized in front of her hotel room, bound and gagged and left in the internal stairwell of the hotel.

Although government authorities, as so often in the past, have blamed many of the attacks on human rights defenders on common crime, Amnesty International is concerned that these acts form part of a systematic campaign aimed at undermining and silencing the work of human rights activists.

The human rights organization believes that ill-considered public statements by the Guatemalan authorities accusing human rights defenders and other activists of seeking to de-stabilize the country may

have encouraged attacks on human rights defenders. Highly placed officials have also suggested that human rights organizations risked being attacked by un-named forces, in effect declaring "open season" on them.

"There is no question that Guatemala's failure thus far to bring past perpetrators to justice contributes to current human rights abuses in the country. Not only does the prevailing impunity give a clear signal that perpetrators can literally continue to get away with murder, but the main targets are the very organizations and people who are courageously trying to combat impunity and seek justice," Amnesty International said.

"The government should, in full consultation with the Guatemalan human rights community, initiate an independent and prompt review of existing protection measures for human rights defenders and others working to combat impunity," the organization added.

Background

Guatemala's long civil conflict formally ended in December 1996 when the military and the armed opposition agreed to Peace Accords, which included a number of human rights-related elements. For example, they provided for the protection of human rights defenders so that they could carry out their lawful work.

However, few of the provisions of the Accords have been implemented so far. Nor have the recommendations of the Historical Clarification Commission, created by the Accords, been carried out. Meanwhile recent months have seen an alarming upsurge in violations directed at human rights defenders and others who have attempted to bring perpetrators of past gross human rights violations to justice.

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